

ANCIENT MESOPOTAMIA – Cultural History

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Part I : Science

Overview Innovation and scientific discovery both marked the unusually creative intellectual spirit of the higher cultures of Mesopotamia. While medical science was a blend of empirical work, including early surgery, with what we might call ‘religious psychotherapy,’ the work put into mathematics and astronomy was aligned with what would be the main discovery directions of those sciences, straight through to our time.

Medicine Our knowledge of Mesopotamian medicine is limited because we have trouble interpreting, and even reading, the cuneiform tablets on which such medical literature is written. The basic character of this medical practice, which is fully in place by the third millennium B.C.E., and which continues at least two millennia more, is clear: illness is viewed as sin, and healing is the prerogative and responsibility of the doctor. To be more nearly exact, doctors fell into three categories: healing doctors; seers; and exorcists. Only the first of these adopted empirical methods like prescriptions or surgical interventions, while the other two categories, practicing as they did in the temples, took on the challenge of driving away evil spirits, or reciting appropriate prayers. A typical prescription might run like this: ‘If a man is sick with a blow on the cheek, pound together fir-turpentine, pine-turpentine, tamarisk, daisy, flour of Inninnu; mix in milk and **beer** in a small copper **pan**; spread on skin, bind on him, and he shall recover.’

Astronomy Mankind’s first record of astronomical--it was what we would now call astrological--observations was due to the Sumerians, and though the Babylonians and Assyrians were eventually to prove to be the greatest of early astronomers, the Sumerians, as in much else--writing, the wheel, the sail--were the ones who got the ball rolling. Both the Babylonians and Assyrians--as we see in the Venus Tablets (1582 B.C.E.) of the Babylonian king Ammizaduga--were able to identify 2000-3000 constellations--e.g. Leo, Taurus, Scorpio, Sagittarius--by the knowledge of whose movements and positions it was made possible for farmers to calculate planting times, and for sailors to calculate nautical positions, with useful accuracy. The movements of Venus, from her positioning as a morning star, to those of an evening star, were analyzed with similar productive consequences for agriculture and shipping. Both the Babylonians and Assyrians acquired an accurate ability to predict lunar eclipses.

Mathematics From as amazingly early as 8000 B.C.E. the Mesopotamian culture was inquiring into fundamental concepts of mathematics, and in the course of its long development, through to the interventions of Alexander the Great, the culture continued to advance in conceptions not only of basic functions but of higher algebra and geometry. Work of extensive complexity was inscribed on clay tablets, as well as analytical procedures using assumptions basic to us today--a baseline figure of sixty (rather than our decimal system, 10) on which to calculate the seconds in a minute, minutes in an hour, and the 360 degrees of the circle. Such already sophisticated premises had their origins in a millennia old practice of establishing the relations between symbols (numerical symbols eventually) and types and quantities of agricultural products; relationships which were in time to be the groundwork for a numeric system and procedures like arithmetic, in which every sort of agricultural calculation was embedded.

Readings

Neugebauer, Otto, *The Exact Sciences in Antiquity*, New York, 1969.

Robson, E., *Mathematics in ancient Iraq: A Social History*, Princeton, 2008.

Discussion questions

To what extent were the needs of agriculture the drivers for the Mesopotamians' great curiosity about scientific thinking?

How closely linked were mathematics and astronomical discoveries in Mesopotamia? Which of the two sciences came first?

Astronomy and astrology were closely related, in the development of Mesopotamian thought. Are they still closely related? Are they both sciences of prediction?

Part II : Art

Overview Mesopotamian art, like that of Persia or Egypt, begins four or five millennia B.C.E., and lasts until, say, the Fall of Babylon (539 B.C.E.). Sumerian, Akkadian, and Babylonian art traditions all had their distinctive themes and styles, and yet there is coherence, to the artistic creations of the Fertile Crescent, that results both from their milieu--the kinds of materials available for art--and from their perforce heavy involvement both with the gods and with military affairs. We will sketch a few examples of this multi-millenia achievement.

The ziggurat The ziggurat was a raised rectangular mountain, constructed from baked clay, with sloping, fortress-like walls, which served as a base for the temple, which would serve as the seat of power in a Mesopotamian city. While we have little evidence concerning these clay temple structures, which naturally break down rapidly, we have many ziggurats to contemplate. One of the most 'powerful' is the ziggurat-temple of King Nanna, from Ur in Iraq, (2500--2050 B.C.E.). Like all those massive desert structures of worship, in Egypt and Mesopotamia, this structure heaves up potently out of the flatland, making a strong statement out of itself.

Miscellaneous Sumerian work Apart from such massive remains as ziggurats, we have some figurines and statuettes, often small and short, like that of a standing male figure (2600 B.C.E., thought to represent the god of vegetation. We have a three tiered inlaid band, depicting figures participating in a royal military triumph--as the king's retinue and as prisoners of war. Almost no painting remains, and with it the strong color of other ancient arts--Indian, Egyptian--is swallowed up in the massiveness of the desert.

Akkadian art The art of Akkad is noteworthy, to pick a single example, for a precise, stone stele (2300 B.C.E.) depicting a regal victory and indicating the ruler enlarged and superior, standing near the summit of the carved slab. We deal in much of this ancient sculptural work with hard materials finely carved, and for military occasions directed to display the current ruling monarch in helmeted and cuirassed power. The present slab is, characteristic of such work, six feet six inches tall.

Babylonia We think first of another stele (1760 B.C.E.) which presents the Law Code of Hammurabi. The importance of this text, to the citizen of Babylon, would have lain first of all in the formally carved scene at the top, which shows Shamash, the sun god, the controller of the weather and of plant life, and the representative of order and justice, handing over the laws to the ruler. This seven foot tall basalt stele is as rigid, direct, and intricately carved as possible in such material.

Assyria The Assyrians (9th-7th centuries B.C.E.) excelled both in the creation of stone reliefs and gate guarding myth-figures--guardian monsters placed at royal gateways, and melding man and winged best in a surreal (and fascinating) mixture--and in fascinating, semi-surreal reliefs of military prowess, such as the depiction of Ashurnasirpal II killing lions. This latter relief is both fierce and purely ornamental, as though its purpose was to delight the eye with planes and variations in relief.

Afterthought Mesopotamian art, unlike ancient Egyptian art, offers the eye little in the way of color, or personal expression. Line, action, and hard demanding materials like basalt and stone, set the Mesopotamian tone, as does its general preoccupation both with military prowess and divine favor.

Readings

Frankfort, Henri, *The Art and Architecture of the Ancient Orient*, London, 1970.

Crawford, Harriett E.W., *Sumer and the Sumerians*, Cambridge, 2004.

Discussion questions

What kind of presence does the religious experience exercise in ancient Mesopotamian Art? How can we today best relate to art which depicts the more than a thousand Mesopotamian deities, and does so sternly, in materials fit only for relief and inscriptions?

Cuneiform is initially, like hieroglyphics, a pictorial language, which impresses itself onto soft clay with a reed stylus. Is the cuneiform lettering system itself an expression of artistic sensitivity?

Would it be fair to say that the ancient Mesopotamians had no interest in art for its own sake, but only in art contextualized by war, power, or control?

Part III : Religion

Overview The timespan of ancient Mesopotamian religion is awe inspiring, 3500 B.C.E.--400 C.E., and any general statement about it will be subject to exceptions. There are, though, general traits: a pervasive belief in the close relation of the gods, who created mortals, to those mortals; a conviction that mortals must work together with the gods, to preserve harmony in the universe; a fear and anxiety toward the gods, who are critical and punitive toward misbehaving mortals.

The god system By one account there were more than 2000 gods in the Mesopotamian pantheon. By the accounts of such texts as the *Enuma Elish* (1100 B.C.E.), which record the genealogy and population of the gods, there was a fairly fixed narrative of the genealogy of the gods, leading down to the current reign of the supreme deity, Marduk. It all begins with a conflict between a male principle, Apsu (the force of fresh water), and a female principle Tiamat (the force of salt water). These two 'forces' generate the gods, who immediately rebel against their progenitors. Ea put Apsu to sleep, then killed him, and from his corpse built the world. Then Ea fought with mother Tiamat, and from the ruins of their struggle rose the god Marduk, who created mortals, and decreed that they should work with him to carry out the work of the world. Marduk, and his associate gods, promised no heavenly reward for virtuous lives, for everybody went to the same underworld after death; virtue lay in supporting the co-operation of gods and mortals during life.

The presence of the gods Each city had its own god or gods, who were worshipped in one or several central temples. These temples were built on high walled mounds called *ziggurats*, and contained, among other rooms, a holy room in which stood the statue of the city's god or gods. (There were also adjacent rooms, in which the relatives of the god could rest, eat, and stay.) The image of the god was presumed to be real, the living presence of the deity, and as such was bathed, dressed, and fed at regular intervals, by the priests of the temple. Prayers were constantly offered to the god, for the salvation of the city, and care was taken to make life agreeable for the god; for instance, the god Marduk was regularly taken out into a charming spot in the country so that he could have fresh air and a change of scene; as the god passed through the streets, his worshippers chanted praise and prayer. The ziggurat itself was understood as a kind of stairway to the heavens, so that the god could directly access the places of worship devoted to them. In most temples a single deity predominated--one traditionally associated with the region--while a number of other associated deities were being worshipped in the same holy site.

Life in relation to the gods The man or woman on the streets lived in more or less constant fear of the gods; he was, therefore, prey to superstition, and ways of warding off evil; addicted to divinations--for fortune telling, astrology, and rogue seers were all rife in the culture; and prone to hallucinations--if that is what we want to call the regular seeing of the gods as bathed in brilliant light. No corner of life was not infused with the concern for placating the gods, and calling on their aid for help in sickness, debt, and fear.

Reading

Bottero, Jean, *Religion in Ancient Mesopotamia*, Chicago, 2001.

Schneider, Tammi, *An Introduction to Ancient Mesopotamian Religion*, Grand Rapids, 2001.

Discussion questions

How did specific Mesopotamian deities become associated with this or that city? What kind of tradition was behind the association of a city with a particular deity?

What light does the epic of *Gilgamesh* (2500 B.C.E.) shed on Mesopotamian religion? How does it speak to the questions of the search for immortality, or the duality of nature and man--as in the hero's friendship with Enkidu?

Do you think the *genealogy* of the gods, as recorded in the *Enuma Elish*, was present and important in the worship life of the 'man on the street' in Sumer?

Part IV : Philosophy

Overview In *Before Philosophy: The Intellectual Adventure of Ancient Man*, Henri Frankfort discusses the thought process of the great early civilizations of the Fertile Crescent, and of Egypt. He argues effectively that the thinking of those cultures, from their origins in the sixth millennium B.C., was mythopoetic, that is, thought in terms of myths, stories of the gods, and of human experience as shaped by the presence of the gods--of whom, for example, there were more than a thousand, just in Mesopotamia. Logical reasoning and empirical observation were relatively underdeveloped, although education was highly valued, and Mesopotamia was renowned for its profusion of teaching academies, which in number exceeded that of temples.

Mythopoetic literature Both the story of Adapa (14th century B.C.E.) and the epic of *Gilgamesh* (2150-1400 B.C.E.) deal with man's destiny on earth, and the 'issue of death.' In both of these poems the central question is 'why is man born only to die? What is the meaning of our life on earth?' The exposition of these tales pits inquiring man against fate or godly deception, though the turn taken by imagination is different in the two works.

The story of Adapa In the story of Adapa the king of that name is tricked by the god Ea, into refusing the offer of immortality. The chief issue here is whether Adapa is an innocent victim or an example of the mortal who is unworthy of more than the fate he gets.

Gilgamesh Gilgamesh is a robust and lusty young king who sets off, with his friend Enkidu, to find the meaning of mortal life, but who is saddened and wisened by his discourse with the ancient sage, Utnapishtim, who convinces him that he has no choice but to accept mortality. Both of these accounts--*Adapa* and *Gilgamesh*-- could be considered 'philosophical,' although they are so by the way they present rather than argue philosophical positions. (That difference is the mythopoetic dimension of the great Mesopotamian creators.) In the way in which they handle man's fall, they open the discourse about man's 'disobedience,' which forms the center of their sister epic, the Book of Genesis in the Hebrew Bible.

Wisdom literature as philosophy Two texts from Mesopotamian literature embrace the theme of the vanity of human life from the view point of dark pessimism: *The Dialogue of Pessimism* (1000 B.C.E.) and the second millennium B.C.E. *Hymn to the Rightful Sufferer*. In both these cuneiform texts the emphasis is on theodicy--the

justification of the ways of god to man--more than on the question of the thwarted human desire for immortality. Obviously, though, all the above literatures are philosophical in the sense that Job or Ecclesiastes are philosophical: ruminating darkly on the human condition.

A central philosophical theme in Mesopotamian thinking Pervasive, throughout Mesopotamian culture--literature, myth, and art--is the implication that the gods, while founders of the universe, are at the same time offering it to human beings as a field for co-operation. That is, men and the gods have the responsibility for 'enriching,' 'completing' the universe, a task in which humanity attempts to contribute by his worship, praise, and prayer toward the gods. Our own contemporary thought--as in the philosophy of Samuel Alexander or Nikos Kazantzakis--has widened that same argument, both through cosmology and through ethics

Readings

Frankfort, Henri, *et. al.*, *Before Philosophy: The Intellectual Adventure of Ancient Man*, Chicago, 1977.

Segal, Robert, *Myth: a very short introduction*, Oxford, 2004.

Discussion questions

How do you explain the connection between Mesopotamian philosophy and that of many books of the Hebrew Old Testament? Can you track the path of this connection, either through geopolitical or intellectual currents?

The dialogue form of certain Mesopotamian philosophical texts, like *The Dialogue of Pessimism*, is significantly different from that of a Platonic dialogue. Please explain how these two kinds of philosophical dialogue differ from each other.

Is religious thought inherently related to philosophical thought? Do they overlap each other? Have the religious texts of the contemporary Abrahamic religions a pronounced philosophical element?